



Advent

GARDNER-WHEAT

Advent 2007

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

In this season of waiting and preparation for the coming of Christ, it's easy to turn Advent into a kind of spiritual fortress. We lament the commercialization of the weeks leading up to Christmas—check-out lines stretching down the aisles, shoppers agonizing over gifts that no one needs and which they themselves cannot afford—and we look to Advent, sometimes, as a means of steeling ourselves against the materialism that threatens to make shambles of Christmas. The temptation is to seek refuge in Advent.

But the lesson of the Incarnation—of Advent—is just the opposite. Holiness doesn't require that we flee the frenzied run-up to Christmas; we're better served entering straight into the midst of it...and transforming it. Advent, after all, is not about escaping *from*; it's about coming *to*. We make the world holy—and we are made holy ourselves, I believe—not when we take flight from this season's rampant commercialism but when we transform it, instead. "It is our mission," Andrew Greeley has written, "to make holy the secular aspects of Christmas. And we do this by being holy people—kind, patient, generous, loving, laughing people—no matter how maddening is the Christmas rush."

This Advent season, let us practice holiness in word, in deed, and in spirit. In the words of Wesley's Advent hymn, "Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set they people free; from our fears and sin release us, let us find our rest in thee." Thanks be

to God that Christ waded into the depths of our sin and gravest fears. Thanks be to God that we are free. And may God be with us as we practice holiness toward neighbor and stranger alike and, in Christ's name, transform our world as we celebrate the coming of our "long expected Jesus."

Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to the 23 other writers who contributed reflections for this book. Their writings are poignant, honest, humorous, tragic, thoughtful,—in short, they reflect the full range of experiences of lives lived in faith. I'm grateful to each of them for making room in a very busy semester to share their stories. Additionally, there are several offices on campus that cooperate to underwrite this project. I'm thankful for their generosity and their assistance.

And, of course, all of us here at Gardner-Webb are thankful for you—your prayers, your support, your investment in our work, your commitment to our mission. We join with you this year in celebrating the wonderful gift of Christ's coming, and we pray that Advent's enduring themes of hope, peace, joy, and love would transform your lives during this season of expectation.



THE PRACTICE OF HOLINESS

Advent at Gardner-Webb
2007

Daniel E. Goodman

Bob D. Shepherd
Chair of New Testament
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HOPE

Sunday, December 2

Psalm 111
Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:37-44

T. Perry Hildreth
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I have an ongoing argument with a friend.

I assert that Advent is not Christmas. Advent is penitential. Advent is St. Martin's Lent. Advent is stark and dark and cold. Advent is one candle at a time. Advent is waiting . . . anticipating.

He calls me a liturgical purist. He says we need a little Christmas. He says deck the halls and hang the greens. He says angelic hosts and shepherds and Mary and Joseph and the Baby in a manger and the Three Kings all at once.

Impatience, I say.

Hope, he says.

I say I will keep Advent in my heart.

He knows that I'm a hypocrite. I decorate the tree the day after Thanksgiving.

There were times as a child when, after play, I might find myself alone outside in the dark. Suddenly, panic! Suddenly, terror! My imagination would chase me all the way to the comfort and light and warmth of home. Sometimes I would try to run so fast that I would trip over my own feet. There are nights when I have even dreamed that I could not run.

Is this not such a night? Is not our darkness too much to bear? Have not too many plowshares been beaten

into swords? Have not too many lions mercilessly devoured too many lambs? Have we not waited long enough already for the ancient promises to be fulfilled?

Our lives are Advent—waiting and anticipating in the dark, lighting our feeble candles against the darkness. Could it ever be too early for Christmas? We need a little Christmas to remind ourselves that God has acted in our world. That God is acting in our world.

We believe. Some light candles one at a time. Some have angels and shepherds and Mary and Joseph and the Baby in the manger and the Three Kings all at once. Together we confess our hope that things will not always be as they are.

Together we say, "One day the Light will triumph completely."

As an undergraduate at UNC-Chapel Hill, I studied for my degree in a major called Peace, War, and Defense. It was a combination of military history, sociology, and political science. My particular focus was on the evolution of warfare which is a very nice way of describing all the different ways (from the slingshot to the thermonuclear device) mankind has tried to harm their fellow humans. Needless to say, studying the greatest catastrophes of human history will challenge anyone's hope in humanity. During the course of my studies, I saw some of my classmates grow cynical toward humanity and become ambivalent to the tragedy of human conflict. Their response to the notion of "Peace on Earth, goodwill towards men" was absolute; it was not going to happen.

Naturally, I asked myself the same questions. Is there any hope for such a people who do so many despicable things to one another? While I was not totally unaffected by the cynicism of my classmates, I never lost my hope for mankind. After much thinking, I realized that my hope never failed because it is directly linked to my faith in God. As Christians, our hope lies directly within our Lord. Through God, as the prophet Isaiah states, all the filth will be washed away and bloodstains will be cleansed. It is the power of God's love that will save us despite our sin.

The psalmist in today's Scripture asks the right question, "Who can show us any good?" How can

we find hope in a world full of hate, death, and sin? What proof do we have of any hope for mankind? The proof is in the ultimate gift from God which is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ provides the evidence of God's hope in His people because through the sacrifice on the cross, we have hope for salvation. If there was no hope for humanity, why would God even bother?

It is this realization of God's sacrifice to the world that has comforted me throughout the years since college. My faith in God sustains my hope of something better for this world and His people. If we have the same faith in God as the Centurion did, then we cannot be hopeless.

It is my hope, in this Advent season, that everyone may know the love of God in their lives. I also hope that all of us may find faith in God and, as a result, a renewed hope for humanity.



HOPE

Monday, December 3

Psalm 4
Isaiah 4:2-6
Matthew 8:5-11

Boyd R. Harris
Circulation Manager,
Dover Memorial Library



HOPE

Tuesday, December 4

Psalm 10
Isaiah 11:1-10
Luke 10:21-24

Donna S. Simmons
Dean, School of Education

The season of Advent is a time of hope and anticipation. The scripture passages for today bring the human condition from great depths of fear and separation from God to the joy of seeing God through His Son and knowing that salvation is a gift to all of us, regardless of our station in life. The psalmist is crying for justice. He is feeling cast adrift by God and is being drowned in the wickedness and injustice that he sees all around him. He is miserable! Yet, at the end of the Psalm there is the hope that "You will listen, O Lord, to the prayers of the lowly and you will give them courage..."

In the Isaiah passage we find one of the most beautiful and hopeful promises of the Old Testament. That promise is of the new king who will rise from the family of David, even though the family had been brought low by sinfulness, just as new shoots rise from old stumps. This new king will rule with wisdom and knowledge and bring justice and equity for all. The kingdom will be filled with peace, and Isaiah promises that "On God's holy hill there will be nothing harmful or evil."

In Luke's passage Jesus is rejoicing in simplicity. He is thanking His Father for what He has shown the unlearned and what He has hidden from the learned. While it may seem very strange to us that God would withhold anything from His people, the intent of the passage is to reinforce that our hope does not come from our intellectual knowledge

of Christ, but comes from knowing Christ in our hearts and accepting His message of salvation.

In the Old Testament, God was separated from His people; yet, there was the hope and promise that one day we would see Him as human and not simply see His power through His mighty acts. That hope was fulfilled through a birth in a Bethlehem stable. For a very short time in history God became human and lived an earthly life among us. Hope had become flesh and humans had the opportunity to meet God through His Son Jesus. As we anticipate and celebrate again the joyous birth of our Savior, may our lives continue to be filled with the hope that each day our walk with Him will become closer and that we may share His love and promise of eternal life with all around us. As the American artist and missionary Alvin Schutmaat wrote in 1984, "May the God of hope go with us every day, filling all our lives with love and joy and peace."

It was the foggiest night I had ever experienced as I traveled alone in my little car up the mountain on my way back to college that Sunday night. It would almost have been better to drive with no lights at all than to have the dim lights reflecting off the fog back toward me. I trudged up the mountain at a snail's pace as I reminded myself that my hope was in Christ, not in myself nor the aging automobile I was driving.

When a line of cars gathered behind me, I decided I had an obligation to lead them up the mountain safely. Slowly I negotiated each curve, occasionally glancing in the rear view mirror to admire the following I had accumulated. A smile crossed my face as I realized I was courageously accomplishing my mission with God's help.

Once the fog lifted and the road changed to four lanes, cars began to pass me on their way to their destinations. But instead of the gestures of appreciation I expected, I was greeted with shaking fists and blowing horns. Puzzled, I tried to determine why my fellow travelers would be upset at me knowing that I had just led them through an extremely dangerous situation. I suddenly realized that none of these followers of mine realized they had been in danger. To them, it was simply a matter of following the lights immediately ahead of them. Undoubtedly they had assumed we should have been going much faster and were irritated by the delay. It occurred to me that I was the only one

who hadn't had the benefit of a light ahead of me and therefore, my situation had been much more difficult.

Isaiah 25:10 states that "the Lord's power will rest on this mountain." I was privileged to witness that power on my voyage through the fog that night. Sadly, because their eyes were fixed on objects only a few feet in front of them, many of my fellow voyagers had failed to recognize the hope that was present on the mountain.

The hope of the holiday season is that of a Savior whose light has come to shine brightly for those courageous enough to trust in him. But rest assured the guiding light of hope in the darkness is not an obstruction. It is a lifesaver.



HOPE

Wednesday, December 5

Psalm 12
Isaiah 25:6-10
Matthew 15:29-37

Rusty Stroupe
Head Baseball Coach
and Instructor of Sociology



HOPE

Thursday, December 6

Psalms 18
Isaiah 26:1-6
Matthew 7:21-27

Donna Spivey Ellington
Professor of History

"Raise up thy power, we beseech thee O Lord, and come: that from the threatening dangers of our sins we may deserve to be delivered by thy protecting and saved by thy freeing."

(Collect for the First Sunday of Advent)

The first week of Advent: that means, at least for those of us in the Northern hemisphere, that the days are growing ever shorter. Living in the twenty-first century, with electric lights and neon signs, it is all too easy to forget the very real sense of danger and unease that can be caused by the coming of the night. Our ancestors knew it well. And even now, we are inclined perhaps to hurry into our warm bright homes a little sooner in the evening than we might otherwise do to escape the deepening darkness. If it were not for the manic pace of the secular winter celebration that calls itself Christmas, we might just be tempted to see what a fitting time it is to be reminded by the Church to contemplate the darkness of our sin and ready ourselves through prayer and penitence for the light of the Lord's coming, for that is what we are called to do.

But which coming to prepare for? Certainly there is the original coming, that coming of God become flesh that is all at once so unexpected, glorious, quiet and profound, the coming that we always seem to insist on celebrating with a superabundance of either warm, sweet, sentimental feelings about babies in a manger, or an orgy of spending and gift-giving, or both together. Oh yes, we are all too eager

to celebrate that one, conveniently forgetting that the shadow of the cross fell also over the manger.

How rude of the Church to insist, just when we want to forget the dark outside and the darkness inside and celebrate, that instead we should contemplate sin and prepare for those other two comings, the coming of Christ into our souls and the final awful coming that will call a halt to human history. But Advent, whether we want it to or not, would remind us that unless we are ready for these comings, we can hardly celebrate the first with any authenticity. Do we dare face up to our real selves so that we can prepare with true joy for the Lord's coming? God grant it.

Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

I grew up in North Carolina at a time when segregation was at the height of national concern. The church was deeply involved in the struggle and the sense of hope permeated the nation. Throughout the nation there was a developing consciousness of the presence and potential of the black church as it placed its print on the Civil Rights movement and provided hope to a divided community and people.

I recall my parents as they attempted to calm our fears and assure us that God would provide and some day things would become better. It was as if they asked us to accept "blind faith." Blind faith isn't assuming something far-fetched, nor is it placing a fleece before God before you ever take action. Blind faith simply believes Jesus and God's word and then acts on it!

Hope is precisely that, a vision of life that guides itself by God's promise, irrespective of whether the situation looks optimistic or pessimistic at any given time. Hope is not simple optimism, an irrepressible idealism; nor is it wishful thinking, a fantasy-daydream that someday our ship will come in. Instead, hope looks at the facts, looks at God's promise, and then lives out a vision of life based upon what God promised.

The psalmist cries out of despair, he feels alone; forsaken by his God and left to his destruction. God is hidden in his life. The writer sees himself,

his suffering, and an unpleasant future. He has no hope and despairs of life itself. Although he believes that God has forsaken him, he does not forsake God. The writer continues to pray, but his prayers go unanswered. He wonders if God ever hears his prayers, and if God does, then why God doesn't answer.

Advent reminds us of a hope that comes from "elsewhere." We celebrate the hope of a new life. We are here looking forward to a life deprived of pain and suffering and instead full of praise, celebration and joy. We are here to celebrate hope that God has given us through his promises and through his fulfillment. We are here to celebrate the coming of the Christ, because without Him, there is no hope. Advent is based on Hope, because the fulfillment of the prophecies is the fulfillment of hope. We are here to experience that fulfillment through our celebration of God's gift to us. Advent is a time for hope and a time for joy. Let us find ways to spread this cheer not only among ourselves, but also to those who do not know the hope that is already around us.



HOPE

Friday, December 7

Psalm 22
Isaiah 29:17-24
Matthew 9:27-31

Clinton Feemster
Director of the Pittman Center
for Congregational Enrichment



HOPE

Saturday, December 8

Psalm 110
Genesis 3:9-15
Luke 8:22-25

James R. Dire
Associate Provost for Arts
and Sciences

The Christmas season truly is the most magical time of year. Who among us doesn't enjoy the seasonal festivities, colorful lights, decorated trees and the traditional songs that we associate with this time of year? Some people even enjoy shopping in the crowded malls and standing in line to sit on Santa's lap for a minute.

Even those of us who hate the annual stress of finding just those right gifts for our loved ones still feel joy in giving a gift that generates a smile, hug and kiss. For Nancy-Pat and me, Christmas brings our annual winter journey to Buffalo to spend the holidays with her family, and to enjoy (briefly) some real Great Lakes winter weather.

For many people, Christmases are filled with magical feelings and happy family traditions, but they don't participate in the real purpose of the season: celebrating the birth of our Savior, Jesus. But there is hope that everyone may someday know Him and the true reason for the season.

As I write these words, I have just returned from visiting my cousin "Alan" in the Midwest. Alan is a few years older than me, but we're a lot alike despite the fact he has lots of long hair, is a half-foot taller than me, and even after his recent diet still outweighs me by 100 pounds. He's retired from General Foods and is ready to retire from his second job (fireman and paramedic). He's had plans to buy property and build a large log cabin in Kentucky for

his retirement. He's had a great life, but he's never accepted the true meaning of Christmas.

Alan was diagnosed with terminal cancer this summer. He wasn't given hope of seeing another Christmas. Chemotherapy has, for the present, halted the growth of his tumors. So, there is a chance he'll have one last Christmas with his wife and extended family around their Great Lake.

During a phone conversation before my visit, Alan started asking me about heaven. My first opportunity to see him last weekend was at the clinic while he received a chemotherapy treatment. I handed him a Bible I bought him as a gift. He said, "Thank you, I really need one of these!"

I told him it's not too late to accept Christmas for what it really is: A celebration of the birth of the one and only Savior. My hope is that Alan is here for at least this one last Christmas.

Even if he's not, my hope is that when Christmas arrives, Alan's real name will be recorded in the Book of Life and that he'll have the most magical Christmas he's ever imagined.

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Prayer Requests



PEACE

Sunday, December 9

Psalms 114
Isaiah 40:1-5
Matthew 5:1-12

Jennifer Zoellner
Director of Admissions,
School of Divinity

For months, he was depressed, dissatisfied, reclusive, moody, and unreachable. On the summer evening that changed her life forever, she found out why. After eight months of marriage, her husband let her know that he missed his former life and felt trapped in their marriage relationship. His verbal dagger plunged into her already weary heart, and then he gave the wound an additional twist: He also was still in love with his previous fiancée and wondered what life would have been like with her—instead of with his wife.

Radiant, wedding-day smiles turned into agonizing tears of grief. Things that should have been secure and strong were shown to be flimsy and illusionary. A person so beloved and familiar had become a stranger. The marriage so joyfully anticipated and cherished was now over.

Although this horrifying event was probably months in the making, it only took one conversation to shake that woman's world into an upheaval. Moments like these—of loss, deep hurt, and overwhelming confusion—have occurred in various forms in countless lives throughout this year of 2007. Now, more than ever, is the time for Advent. Now is the time for healing and peace, for an awe-inspiring divine breakthrough, for wounded people to know that the loving and personal God really is with us.

As the second week of Advent begins, our theme is peace. We may eagerly locate the Scripture readings for this day and seek soothing words. Yes, those

are present, but, surprisingly, they exist alongside disturbing and—at times—violent images. In Matthew, we meet John the Baptist, who hurls threats of an approaching wrath and speaks of poised axes and unquenchable flames. In Isaiah, we are greeted with much gentler words—the familiar caress of “Comfort, comfort my people. . .” But in this passage, too, there is a sense of dramatic rearranging: valleys lifted, mountains flattened, and other amazing changes in terrain. In Psalm 114, we find even more things being turned around: a rock transformed into a refreshing spring, impassable bodies of water cleared so that God’s people could walk through.

Who is it behind all of these awesome events? Who is still present when the world is turned upside down? Whom will we see when the earth stops shaking? Who is this all about, anyway? The LORD our God.

It is the seemingly devastating upheavals that prepare the way for God to break into our world and into our personal lives. Painful shock and apparent disaster can refine us and bring us into an intimate encounter with the Holy One. It is then that the glory of the LORD will be revealed (Isa. 40:5), and it is *then* that we are enveloped in God’s peace.

"For the needy shall not always be forgotten and the help of the poor shall not perish forever." (Psalm 9:18)

Mary greeted the news that she would bear the savior of the world with the famous words of "The Magnificat." Echoing the Song of Deborah in 1 Samuel 1:1-10 she praised the Lord in part with these words, "he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away." (Luke 2: 51b-53).

Starting from the very moment when Jesus was conceived his entire life and ministry were wrapped up with the plight of the poor and the outcast. He reached out to them constantly, he repeatedly referred to them in his sermons and parables and he went out of his way to minister to them. One might say Jesus' relationship to those in need formed the core of his entire ministry. That is why Advent should be a time of reflecting on the notion that the poor, the needy and the outcasts of society always had a very special place in the heart and mind of Jesus.

"Good King Wenceslaus" was born in 907 near Prague. His grandmother, Saint Ludmila, asked that she might educate the young prince, and along with his Slavic language he was taught to love God. His father later sent him to the Latin school at Budec. When his father was killed fighting against the Magyars, Wenceslaus was called upon to rule the country.

One of his first official acts was to establish liberty of conscience in an attempt to quiet the unrest of pagan nobles. "If God bores you, why forbid others to love Him?" he asked them. He himself desired to love God above all things and with all his heart. He wore penitential garments under his royal robes, and spent many nights in prayer, especially to thank God for His blessings. He kept a very strict fast in Lent, and more than once made a pilgrimage, barefoot along the icy roads.

Today we remember him in the famous Christmas carol, which concludes with this stanza:

In his master's steps he trod, where the snow lay dinted;

Heat was in the very sod which the saint had printed.

*Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank
possessing,*

*You who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find
blessing.*

Is not this what Jesus would ask us to remember this Advent season, that you who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing?

O Lord who gave all to the least among us, help us to follow in your steps and do the same. Amen.



PEACE

Monday, December 10

Psalm 9
Isaiah 35:1-10
Luke 5:17-26

Jim Lawrence
Professor of
Communication Studies



PEACE

Tuesday, December 11

Psalms 30

Hosea 11:3-4

Matthew 18:12-14

Lou Ann Scates
University Registrar

I have experienced different levels of peace in my adult life. My husband, Doug, and I have been married for 20 years and we are blessed with a wonderful son, Andy, now 16 years old. But finding peace in my life was rough for several years after Andy was born.

Doug and I wanted to have a baby brother or sister for Andy. We did everything possible to have another child. In our prayers, we asked that God's will be done but we also prayed to be blessed with another child. After several attempts of artificial insemination failed, I will never forget the doctor telling us that he had found a large amount of endometriosis and that was the reason I could not get pregnant.

My state of mind and my feelings of peace flew out the window. I questioned why it had to be me, why other women could have babies when we wanted another child so bad. "It was not fair," I kept saying to myself. Over the years I would cry and get angry with myself and I knew how disappointed Doug was. I knew it was all my fault, and yet it was out of my control. A sense of peace finally came in something Andy said to me. When Andy was old enough to understand, he and I talked about the reason he did not have a brother or sister. In his pure innocence he told me that it was ok, he liked being an only child. I think God was trying to make me experience peace through a child's words.

The time and constant love we gave Andy over these many years have helped increase the level of peace within my heart. I realize that peace comes in all different levels in one's life. As I struggled, I knew that God was in control. When you look in the Bible the verse that fits my situation is Psalm 29:11, "The Lord will give strength unto his people, the Lord will bless his people with peace." With this word of God, I know that God will continue to grant me peace throughout my life.

There are still moments that my eyes tear up when I see a new baby or even while we walk through the baby section in a department store and a certain baby outfit catches my eye. But I know that God is in control and I have grown in peace through the power and strength that God has given me. I have peace within my heart thanks to God and his love for me and his gift of peace.

One of the richest and most challenging words in all of the New Testament stands at the heart of Luke's brief story about what happened as Jesus was entering the city of Nain for a visit. He and the disciples passed a funeral march on its way out to a place of burial. A young man had died, the only son of a mother who was weeping bitterly at her loss. Jesus stopped the procession, telling the mother not to weep. Then, touching the bier, Jesus told the young man to arise. He sat up and began to speak, stirring a mixture of joy and fear among those watching.

What Luke emphasizes, though, is how Jesus reacted to the sight of the distraught mother. He felt "deep compassion over" her, we are told, though the Greek word is richer than we can summon in English. It is a word that refers to something visceral, not just in Jesus, but in us; something that changes us by virtue of our "seeing"—the word itself suggests that. It even refers to our being affected empathetically, emotionally, mentally, psychically, and even physically. It cannot be a cliché, like "compassion" or even "gentleness" sometimes is, but a jarring experience of "seeing" that affects what we do.

In Psalm 103, the writer attempts to catch the same experience by saying that God "pities" his children, those who fear him. Even here, it is human language struggling to identify a divine quality that God has planted in the human breast. If only we, God's children, following the example of Christ,

can keep that quality of profound "seeing" alive within ourselves.

Few eras have needed this quality of Christ-like "seeing" more than this one. And we do not even have to treat it figuratively. Nightly the television news adds new mothers to the list of those weeping over lost sons, sometimes only sons. Or which is worse—the sons who come home from a senseless war draped only in flags or those who return without legs or arms? Or what of the thousands of Iraqi men, women, children, and elderly who are the innocent victims of mass bloodshed that should not have been? Has our ability to "feel deeply" been so numbed by politics and lying and full color slaughter that nothing can "move" us to care much anymore? Or can we still, this Advent, learn that special biblical compassion that pushes the child of God to *act*—as well as to feel and weep and pray?



PEACE

Wednesday, December 12

Psalm 103
Zechariah 2:14-17
Luke 7:11-17

Joseph Webb
Professor of
Communication Studies



PEACE

Thursday, December 13

Psalms 37
Isaiah 41:13-20
Matthew 11:11-15

Daniel E. Goodman

Bob D. Shepherd Chair of
New Testament Interpretation,
School of Divinity

You're reading this in December, but I'm writing it early in October. Maybe you're near a window as you're reading, and you can see the sun. Or the shadows. Maybe you've watched one of Autumn's great gusts blow some of the last, most stubborn leaves from the trees. Or maybe it's raining.

I hope so. Where I'm sitting—in October—it hasn't rained for what seems like weeks.

"I don't pray for the weather," I told my friend. I wouldn't know what to say if I tried. For even as it's as dry as a desert here in North Carolina, there is flooding in Ohio, wildfires burning thousands of acres in Utah, and snow falling already in Wyoming. Is any of it due to persistence—or negligence—in prayer? Not by my way of thinking.

Others think differently, I realize. Honi-the-Circle-Drawer was a Jewish scholar who lived several decades before Jesus. As his name suggests, he sought relief from a particularly fierce drought by drawing a circle in the dust and refusing to leave it until God sent rain. God obliged, first with too soft a rain; then with too hard a rain, and finally, after Honi's pleading, with a rain that was just right. The Book of Common Prayer even includes a prayer for rain ("Send us, we entreat thee, in this time of need, such moderate rain and showers that we may receive the fruits of the earth, to our comfort and to thy honor").

More recently, and a good bit closer to home, the governors of Georgia and Alabama both issued proclamations over our arid summer urging citizens to pray for rain. The internet chatter in response ranged from outrage to cynicism to wholehearted support. Or, as one blogger put it, "What can it hurt?"

Today's Scripture from Isaiah says that when the poor and needy seek water, God will open rivers on bare trails and fountains in the midst of valleys. The wilderness, says Isaiah, will be transformed into a pool. Why? "So that all may see and know and understand that the hand of the LORD has done this."

The rain is going to come. By the time you're reading this, it probably already has. Much like Advent itself, we don't aid the rain's arrival and we can't forestall its departure. But our anticipation is rich, especially when we have lived so long without it and when we realize how very much we need it. When relief finally comes to those whose tongues—whose lives, perhaps—are "parched with thirst," Isaiah describes it as God's promise that "I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them."

In the meantime, we wait. You in December; I in October. For rain. For relief. For Advent.

In struggling to determine exactly what to write for this Advent excerpt, as is often the case, no perfect words came to mind, but the perfect Bible verse did.

I have always been told that God will supply the verse that you need when you need it. This was such an occasion. The verse that leaped off the page for me was Philippians 4:7, in which Paul writes, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

I can't help but imagine that God is smiling, and maybe even chuckling a bit at the irony surrounding His enlightenment of this verse to me. Just when I am trying to understand something about his Peace—just when I need to search for the "perfect verse," God provides me with one that serves as a gentle reminder that his Peace is *beyond* understanding. Wow! All too easily, scholarly minds in scholarly settings come up with scholarly answers to life's great mysteries. The mystery of God, however, does not have a scholarly answer. For that, I am grateful.

Despite this, I have found myself searching for understanding, and for peace, a lot lately. In the chaos surrounding a recent set of unimaginable events in my family, there have been many questions, and most of them remain, and may always remain, unanswered. Typing the words will seem too callous; too succinct. Therefore, not so

that you can understand, but so that you can follow, the gist of the situation is that an innocent, loving, beautiful six year-old boy died, and four hours later, his brother—just as innocent, just as beautiful, came into the world. For four hours of eternity, my uncle status was in limbo.

Advent, of course, is the season of anticipated arrival of the Christ child. Somehow, in my mind's feeble attempts to marry the near simultaneous death and birth of my nephews, I cannot help but draw comparisons. When God gave us his only son, he *knew*, even amidst the celebration of Jesus' birth, that *his child* was born to die on a cross...so that we could live. Perhaps the only thing that could have made my six year-old nephew's tragic death any more painful for his parents would have been if they had known from birth that he would die in this accident. Ah. God knew. Thankfully, His love for us far surpassed that knowledge. There will continue to be many restless nights in our family, but it is in God's Peace, which we will never understand, that we continue.



PEACE

Friday, December 14

Psalms 35
Isaiah 48:17-19
Matthew 11:16-19

C. Mike Stimpson
Director of Admissions,
Graduate School



PEACE

Saturday, December 15

Psalms 42

Isaiah 51:1-8

Matthew 17:9-13

Jennifer Buckner
Director, Learning
Assistance Program

After ten years of toying with the idea, my husband and I decided to move to Shelby where we'd be enveloped with a loving, extended family. He announced our intention to move in January. We were without a job, without a home, and without a buyer. Months of painting, remodeling, and boxing up ten years in Rowan County busied our days. Against my frail judgment, we made a decision of faith.

On March 7th, our house was officially on the market. Three weeks later, a buyer who appreciated old homes made an offer that we accepted. Two days later, we drove to Shelby to look at a home we'd eyed on the Internet for months. Once we stepped foot out of the car, I could hear my girls laughing with the pines that bordered this country lot. Our offer was accepted the following day. A phone conversation and interview with an employer the same weekend resulted in a job offer. Within less than a week, we'd become members of this community. We waited. God provided.

Writing this devotional indicates that once again God has rewarded us undeservingly. In our move here, I hoped that one day my name might become one in the faculty directory, allowing me the space and air to breathe in the many questions I have as an educator, a writer. Within a year, doors were opened so that I might enter into conversations not afforded an educator who runs from one class to

another with exactly seven minutes of rest between bells.

In this season of advent, I'm reminded of the promise of blessings to come. Preparing myself to "go and meet with God" especially in times when I do feel overburdened with grief and fear has proven a pivotal choice in being receptive to God's graciousness. In thanks, I welcome seasons (such as this) that encourage the reflection I find so richly embedded in me as a woman, wife, mother, daughter, and educator. And I pray for strength as I move through faith again.





JOY

Sunday, December 16

Psalm 103
Isaiah 35:1-6
Matthew 11:2-11

Ben Leslie
Provost and
Senior Vice President

The familiar chorus of “Happy Birthday” came to an end, and as expected, the 12 year old at the head of the table began to blow out his candles. We applauded his success. But no sooner had the last one gone out, than one by one the candles began to reignite. The celebrant’s eyes grew bigger with surprise, the room filled with giggles and warm-hearted laughter, and the cake was once again fully lit. The practical joke his parents had played with trick candles was, as they had known it would be, well received by all, simply adding to the joyful playfulness of the occasion.

The Bible talks a lot about joy. Joyfulness stands at the very heart of the creature’s relationship to God. With joyful hearts we give thanks to God for the world around us, for family, and for the many good things that come our way. Joy is that deep-rooted satisfaction that rises to the surface whenever we follow God in obedience, whenever we treat others with kindness, or respond to those in need with service. Paul speaks of joy as one of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5, a fundamental mark of the Christian life.

But the tragic truth of human nature is that inevitably each of us in our own way will extinguish the joy within as we turn our back on the Creator, and focus instead on our own needs and desires. Compassion gives way to selfishness, kindness to hurtfulness, caring to apathy. And when this happens, we blow hard on the candles of life,

extinguishing their flame, exchanging joy for the satisfaction of our own desires.

The Psalmist writes, “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.” The 103rd Psalm is a Psalm of joy. The psalmist celebrates the incomprehensible mercy of the Father, who though He has every reason to condemn us, instead sets anger aside and chooses to forgive our sins. Even as we extinguish the candles of joy, God stands ready to reignite them, to re-instill that peculiar joy that comes from standing within the divine will.

In this Advent season may each of us prepare our hearts for Christmas, by rediscovering the joy that comes from experiencing the mercy of God and living out the Christ-centered life of giving and compassion.

With each changing season God gives me an opportunity to reflect on a new perspective about life. The changes in nature can be compared to our spiritual journey, which helps me to know that God is real, that He is ever present in the world today, and that He will return. This profound truth gives me hope in a somewhat unpredictable world. Current events and the day-to-day living have helped me to establish a “new normal” in my thought process. The thoughts that once gave me comfort when I thought about things that happened in the past are not the force that guides me to my future.

With each new day, I have a spirit of expectancy, of anticipation, and preparation. With each changing season, I know that God will sustain me and cover me in His peace in this constantly, ever-changing world. As I watch the changes occur in nature, I recognize that the hope that I once anticipated is found in those things that often appear to be dormant in my life. That is also when I recognize that all of creation waits for all things to become new.

For the Old Testament reminds me that God used what we sometimes see as imperfect individuals to share His profound word. One might even go as far as to say these individuals were people who, in our natural mind, we would never select to do the job. Many of the “champion/conquerors” would have been perceived as being too young, undeveloped, unwise, and abusers of power. Yet in my “new

normal” thought process, I believe we can find hope in the fact that God will use the most unlikely person to do a magnificent work for Him. In this season, I would challenge us all not to judge but to encourage everyone we meet to seek direction and affirmation from God. More importantly, if God can use Moses, David, Jacob, and Joseph then He could choose anyone of us in His kingdom. That gives me hope.



JOY

Monday, December 17

Psalms 44
Genesis 49:2-10
Matthew 1:1-17

Cynthia McKinney
Professor and
Director of Student Teaching
and Field Experiences,
School of Education



JOY

Tuesday, December 18

Worship—
Jeremiah 23:24
Matthew 1:13-23

Denise Gaults
Associate Professor of Fine Art

We are instructed in the Psalms to clap our hands, to shout to God cries of joy; and to sing praises to God our King.

These outward signs of joy are not often in our lives on a daily basis. We get caught up in the struggles that we must overcome each day and we forget to be joyful. How fortunate it is that God, who sent his only begotten Son that we might be saved, also sent us children.

My daughter will dance and sing at any moment for no apparent reason. She will pull me out of my chair and insist that I dance with her. How refreshingly contagious it is to make these joyful noises to the Lord. Surely this must be part of what Jesus meant when he said in Matthew 19:14 "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." We all smile when we catch a glimpse of the innocent joy of children, especially when it spills out across their parents and all around them.

Christian joy, I think, should be like this. It does not need to be so deep and serious and concerned with the state of the world that it gets buried. Occasionally you meet adults who are so full of the Spirit that their joy is as contagious and insistent as that of children. I met one of these folks, Ruth, in the mountains of North Carolina.

In 1980 I moved to the mountains to live in the craft community near Penland School. I spent most

of the first year living in a tent and building a post and beam house, cutting the lumber off the land, learning how to be an electrician, doing all the work myself. Ruth was the owner, with her husband, of the little store where I shopped for groceries and supplies. You could not meet Ruth without noticing that something was different about her. On that first meeting she extended an invitation to attend her church. Ruth continued to share her faith, her belief, but most of all her joy in being a believer. Her testimony was not judgmental, but her joy was convincing. Her joy in salvation was contagious.

During the Christmas season we are reminded of the joy that Christians share. We are afforded the opportunity to sing the great old hymns of praise and to dance in the aisle. I hope that we can all carry a little more of that Spirit beyond the season. Joy is the outpouring of growing Christian faith. Be joyful.

I remember as a boy reading the Peanuts comic strip—the single frame scene at the bottom of the front page that counts down the days until Christmas—and being very excited about Christmas. Charles Schulz knew what kids were about, and what got them excited.

“Excited” is a word which brings up another memory. A retired religion professor once challenged me, “Neal, I want you to do a word study and see how many times the word ‘excited’ appears in Scripture.” Needless to say, I did not look for the word because I knew the point he was making. He was challenging the modern church and, in his view, its fascination with equating “getting people excited” with evidence of a true encounter with Christ. Interestingly enough, though, I found other words, themes, and phrases like “celebrate,” “dancing and singing,” “rejoice,” and, of course, “joy.”

Now those words definitely are biblical, and can accurately describe the feelings, emotions, and reactions when a person encounters the risen Christ. But lest we forget, not everyone had those reactions when they first recognized Jesus. The young ruler walked away sad.

When Jesus told his followers that He was the “Bread of Life,” many of them deserted Him on that day. On a couple of occasions, Jesus was asked to leave, because the people were filled with great

fear. His mother and brothers said He was “out of his mind.” And of course, many were filled with anger and rage at His teachings, and ultimately took, so they thought, His life.

When I think about that Peanuts comic strip, I remember how excited I would get. Now that I am a Christian, however, that excitement has turned into joy because the true meaning of Advent has been fulfilled in my life. But there is another Coming. Imagine with me the next time you pick up your newspaper, there is a Peanuts comic in the bottom corner that says, “23 Days until the Return ... 17 Days until ... 2 Days...” Wow! How would that change your daily routine? For those of us who have been redeemed, Christ’s return gives you and I reason to celebrate and rejoice. We also have, like Jesus, heavy hearts for those who know Him not.

Joy is a precious gift that only truly comes from the Father. May we be so filled with His love that we are eager to share the reason for our Joy with others.



JOY

Wednesday, December 19

Psalms 49
Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 1:5-25

Neal Payne
Director of Student Ministries



JOY

Thursday, December 20

Psalm 60
Isaiah 7:10-14
Luke 1:26-38

Lauren E. McInnis
Director of Academic Schools
Development

Many of us have been blessed with a life rich with tradition, experiences we will always carry with us, and memories to cherish. Together, I am sure we can recount many such traditions: dragging out box after box of Christmas tree decorations; Christmas tables filled with yummy treats and loved ones gathered around; a favorite Christmas anthem we wait an entire year to hear our Church choir sing; opening the very first Christmas gift, wrapped in the shiniest silver paper and tied with the biggest red ribbon...

The list could continue on and on and on. What I have come to realize is that we all have those special traditions—big and small—that we repeat over and over. But what is a tradition? And, more importantly, does it mean that when traditions change they will no longer be as special as they were before? Does it mean that every holiday from that point forward will be filled with remembering what was rather than creating new memories and new traditions?

The optimist in me hopes not. The greatest Christmas gift I ever received, in direct competition with the hot-pink, three-story Barbie Dream House (age 3) and the amazingly cool hot-pink scooter with white wheels (age 7), was an opportunity of service.

During my junior year of high school, I heard about a volunteer opportunity in my community.

With every intention of padding my resume for college admissions applications, I signed up. Without realizing what I was getting into, I found myself the Saturday before Christmas working the *Cheerfund*—a charity program that distributes new toys to needy families. I spent hours helping parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles search for the perfect Christmas present. In stacks of Barbies, books and baseball bats, we found shiny new toys to delight their children. This ended up being one of my most treasured experiences, teaching me firsthand the value of service during the season and the joy that lies in giving rather than receiving.

While I must admit that I have not made my experience with the *Cheerfund* a “tradition” in my life, the spirit of that Christmas season has stayed with me much longer than the mansion, scooter or any other gift. I have found a lingering joy from the memories created in the two years I served the *Cheerfund*. In stepping outside of the proverbial box—my comfortable traditions—I received the greatest joy. This Christmas, challenge yourself to find new joys by doing something new... and see where it takes you.

Anyone who really knows me knows how much I love to spend time with my four grown children. Three of them are now married so getting all of them together has become more difficult as our family has grown. I love the special times when we can all be together and I look forward to these gatherings. Whether it is a holiday, a family birthday, a wedding, a graduation, or a family vacation, these are wonderful times to share and we delight in being together.

Yes, I love the times we are all together, but I treasure the time I spend with each of them one on one. I love the time spent with the one who calls and shares a concern and prayer request, or the time shared together helping pack boxes in the heat of the summer for an upcoming move, or the conversation shared over a cup of coffee at Starbucks, or helping remodel a porch at their house, or a shared shopping trip to look for that special outfit, or walking together along the creek that meanders through their property. The list is endless but no matter what the situation, it brings me great joy to spend time with my children.

On a recent summer Sunday afternoon, I received an unexpected call from my oldest daughter to come over for hotdogs and homemade ice cream. I was filled with joy at this unexpected opportunity to spend time with her and her family. As I thanked the Lord for her call, I was reminded of how the Lord loves to spend time with each of us.

The Lord delights when we come together and worship corporately and praise Him. However, He also longs to spend time with us individually. He desires that we bring all our concerns, joys, and cares to Him; it brings Him great joy when we spend time in His presence. Luke 10:38-42 tells the story of Martha and Mary; Martha who was busy with preparations while Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to Him. Martha complained that Mary was not helping with the work, but Jesus rebuked her by replying that Mary was doing the better thing by sitting in His presence.

During this season of Advent, while we busily prepare for the celebration of Christ's birth, let us not become so busy with the hustle and bustle of preparations that we lose sight of who the celebration is for. Let us take time to be still, to come into His presence, to worship Him...to share joy spending time one on one with Jesus.



JOY

Friday, December 21

Psalms 51
Zephaniah 3:14-18
Luke 1:39-45

Frances Sizemore
Associate Director
of Human Resources



JOY

Saturday, December 22

Psalms 138
1 Samuel 1:24-28
Luke 1:46-56

Joe Collins
Assistant Professor of Religious
Studies and Philosophy

Many of us talk of joy as if it were some force that envelopes unsuspecting saints. Certainly, at this time of year we celebrate the “joy of the season” as if it were some ethereal mist that rests on our world for a short time until it dissipates in the winter of January. It is a good feeling brought about by some toy or, for the more mature, the chance to commingle with family again. Although we celebrate such “joys” during Christmas, to limit the definition of joy to such earthbound pleasures is to diminish what God offers us.

Our culture’s literature and folklore depict Christmas joy as the result of serving others unselfishly. St. Nicholas is purported to have been a man who used personal wealth to meet the needs of others, especially the most vulnerable ones in society—children. Ebenezer Scrooge, the harsh taskmaster of Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*, experienced joy only as he was converted and committed himself to the well-being of those less fortunate than himself. George Bailey, a mild-mannered loan officer in the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*, experienced joy even when threatened with jail time when he was able to recognize the results of his unselfish service to others (with the help of Clarence, of course). We, too, derive joy when we can see beyond our own needs and address the needs of others; however, is that truly the joy of Christmas?

In our Scripture for today, we see two mothers who experience a joy. The joy they express comes on

the heels of obedience to a God that chooses them to be a part of His plan for their people. Hannah gives her only son Samuel to God in obedience to a promise made. Mary’s song of joy comes after she humbly submits to God’s plan to send the savior of the world through her womb. Both were obedient, and both break into joyous song.

Secular movies, devoid of any recognition of God, can celebrate the Christmas season. They relish the joy of family and unselfish giving. However, it is the obedient heart that realizes the grace needed to contribute to God’s kingdom. The obedient heart is personally vested in God’s provision. It truly knows the joy of that provision made on that Christmas long ago.



Prayer Requests

[illegible]



LOVE

Sunday, December 23

Psalms 8
Isaiah 52:7-10
Luke 1:57-66

Bonnie Moore
Textbook Manager

Three years ago, the Lord gave my family the most precious gift, the news that we would soon have a new addition to our family, my nephew, Walker Michael Shore. This news was extra special because doctors had been telling my sister she may never be able to have a child.

I still remember the first time ever that my sister called to tell me that I was going to be an aunt. I was still a student at Gardner-Webb and was dating my now husband, Justin. I ran as fast as I could to find him and share the good news. I also still remember two months later when she called to tell us she had lost the baby. I hung up the phone and fell to my knees crying. My sister had been diagnosed with a medical condition that makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to have a child. My heart broke for her.

It wasn't too long after that when she called again with news that she was expecting. We were so excited and filled with hope. Then, almost like clockwork, during an ultrasound two months later her doctor was unable to locate a heartbeat. Things were looking grim and to say that everyone was disappointed and discouraged would be a huge understatement. It seemed that the doctors were right—she may never have a child. My sister was heartbroken and almost completely out of hope. She told us all that they were finished trying and just couldn't handle any more letdowns. But thankfully, they secretly decided to give it one

more try, which leads me to three Christmases ago when she asked my mom to unwrap a small box from under the tree. Much to everyone's surprise, it was a pregnancy test. A *positive* pregnancy test! We were once again filled with excitement, joy, and love. Over the course of the remainder of her pregnancy, we prayed harder than ever. Today, all thanks to God, we have a handsome, adorable, and smart little boy in our family who just celebrated his second birthday a few months ago.

Now Christmas especially reminds me of God's love and gift of life. Looking into the eyes of my little nephew, I can't even imagine how much love God has for us that He gave His only Son, so that we may have everlasting life. Praise God for his perfect plan and perfect timing.

With just one day remaining till Christmas, we don't have much time left to make our final preparations, do we? Because, like we used to say as children, "Ready or not, here I come," and Christmas will be here tomorrow! We're fast running out of time to get ready for the long-anticipated birth of the Savior of the world.

So with just one day remaining, thanks to Luke's Gospel, we are invited to listen to the happy ending of a story that has a not-so-happy beginning. Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, is strangely hushed due to his unwillingness to believe the impossible—that an old man with a barren wife can father a child. In fact, that's the last thing we hear Zechariah say until the impossible actually happens—when John is born by the power of the Holy Spirit! Then, by the power of the same Holy Spirit, the impossible happens again—this time, nine months later, Zechariah gets his voice back! His silence is broken with singing—which is where the story gets interesting for us. When filled with the same Spirit, we too will overhear our own voices wonderfully prophesying about a "horn of salvation" (Lk. 1:69) that has been raised up for us!

Now, I don't know about you, but this business of prophesying makes me a little (make that—VERY) nervous. Yet this is the message, and this is the one time of the year when believing angels, feeling the Holy Spirit, and prophesying all seem to come a little easier than they might at other times. And if skeptical old Zechariah, a priest who

was silenced because he did not believe the angel's message that an old man would have a son, is ultimately empowered to break forth in song, then maybe—just maybe—we will find our voices, begin to sing, and prophesy just in time for the arrival of the Savior of the world!

Imagine that! We get to sing the song of the truth "of salvation through the forgiveness of sins because of the tender mercy of our God" (Lk. 1:77). We get to be bearers of this good news, and to sing this song with passion, because we have had first-hand experience of God's tender mercy ourselves. Surely, no one knew mercy better than Zechariah. Surely, no one knows mercy better than we do. So let's sing—let's prophesy—as the Holy Spirit gives us voice!



LOVE

Monday, December 24

Psalms 89
II Samuel 7:1-17
Luke 1:67-79

Robert W. Canoy
Dean and Professor of Christian
Theology, School of Divinity



LOVE

Tuesday, December 25

Psalm 112
Isaiah 62:1-12
Luke 2:1-14

A. Frank Bonner
President of the University

"They have distributed freely; they have given to the poor." (Psalm 112)

In 1897, eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon wrote to The New York Sun to ask, "Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?" In what has become the most famous editorial ever written, Francis P. Church replied, "Yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus."

At some point, of course, every child who ever did believe in Santa Claus wonders just what Virginia did so famously. My own experience came at a similar age and in a manner that I still vividly remember. I was with my uncle when we visited a family with several very young children, and even in my youthful innocence I could tell that they were in dire poverty. Disturbed by what I had seen, I suggested to my uncle on the way home that at least Santa Claus would be good to the children. It might have been less troubling had my uncle said simply that there is no Santa Claus. Instead, he said that these children would have no Santa Claus at Christmas—that Santa did not visit all children. That Santa would not visit these children was far more disturbing to me than the idea that he might not exist at all.

I still believe Santa Claus exists in the sense that Francis P. Church said that he does. Said Church, "He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound

and give to your life its highest beauty and joy." Santa Claus exists in each of us when we exercise love, generosity and devotion—especially to those less fortunate. The Psalmist wrote of those who fear the Lord: "They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever" (Psalm 112: 9).

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.



Prayer Requests

Gardner-Webb University at a Glance

- Gardner-Webb is a private, Baptist-related university located in the Piedmont region of North Carolina
- We serve nearly 4,000 students from over 39 states and 21 foreign countries
- In addition to 45 major programs of study in our undergraduate division, Gardner-Webb offers a Graduate School, a Graduate School of Business, and a Divinity School, which together enroll over 1,200 students
- Our 130+ full-time faculty (15:1 student-to-faculty ratio) are teacher-scholars who help foster meaningful dialogue, critical analysis, and spiritual challenge within a diverse community of learning
- Gardner-Webb has been honored by U.S. News and World Report magazine as one of America's best colleges
- Gardner-Webb fields 21 NCAA Division I athletic teams as a member of the Atlantic Sun, Big South, and Northeast Conferences
- More than 90 percent of Gardner-Webb students receive financial aid in the form of grants, loans, scholarships, or work-study positions
- Students seeking leadership opportunities can participate in almost 40 different professional, religious, or social organizations on campus
- Gardner-Webb features active chapters of at least 10 national honor societies in such academic disciplines as Biology, Spanish, English, French, Psychology, Religious Studies and Theology, and Nursing

Gardner-Webb University

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